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BIRD LORE OF OTHER DAYS.
ROGER B. HILDRETH'S DIARY, 1867,
SPRINGFIELD, MASS.
BY
ROBERT O. MORRIS.

SPRINGFIELD REPUBLICAN, MAR. 26, 1914.

Springfield Republican, March 26, 1914.

BIRD LORE OF OTHER DAYS

ROGER B. HILDRETH'S DIARY

Robert O. Morris Recalls the First Curator of the Museum of Natural History and Comments on the Birds of Then and Now.

To the Editor of The Republican:—

Roger B. Hildreth, who died here in March, 1872, had been a practicing attorney and resident of Springfield for the preceding quarter of a century. He was born in Marlboro, but came here very soon after he was graduated from Harvard college in 1843. He was a warden of Christ church, very much interested in the city library in the early days of that institution, and in 1859 he, with a few others were the promoters of the museum of natural history of which he was one of the first curators. He was an enthusiast in all matters relative to Nature, and an especial devotee of ornithology. The following selected notes from his diary of 47 years ago may be of interest to some of the bird students of the present day:—

"Good Friday, April 19, 1867. In my morning walk to-day I saw and heard for the first time this season the ruby-crowned kinglet. So intent were they in their occupation that, though I approached within a few feet of them, they apparently took no notice of me, but continued all the while actively searching for their food and every minute or two uttered a low but quite pleasing little ditty.

"May 12. At the old homestead of the late Festus Stebbins on Main street I was surprised at the remarkable activity of a numerous colony of cliff swallows. More than 30 years ago they took up their residence under the eaves on the northerly side of a venerable barn on the premises, and as they have always been charming pets and freed from annoyance and molestation by their kind and appreciative 'landlords' and frieds, they have punctually and regularly returned to their old quarters, rebuilding their weather-shattered and pot-shaped mud nests. Up to this date more than 30 of these laboriously formed little homes are in quite an advanced condition, and before the month is out the number will probably be more than doubled. When this colony first took possession the space between the barn and the Connecticut river was entirely open. It is now almost entirely built over, yet so attached have these charming little swallows become to their 'old Springfield homes' that neither railroads nor all the noise and confusion of a busy city have apparently had any disturbing effect upon them.

"May 19. In my morning walk through the cemetery I saw a fine pair of rose-breasted grosbeaks, evidently mated and preparing to build.

"May 23. Saw Blackburnians this morning among the pine trees in the cemetery, beautifully and lively.

"May 25. On Nye's brook in Russell with W. S. Shurtleff 'trouting.' On the wooded banks of the brook the warblers were in great abundance, especially Blackburnian, black-throated, green and blue, black and white and chestnut-sided warblers. Notes of the latter very much like the summer yellow bird.

"May 27. Black-poll warblers are filing and scraping their tiny notes among the elms in Court square in great abundance

this morning.

"May 30. In my morning walk in the cemetery found the Blackburnians quite plentiful, as also blue yellow-backs, red-starts, purple finches, Maryland yellow-throats, warbling vireos, etc. There are now two pairs of rose-breasted grosbeaks apparently breeding.

"Saturday, June 1. On Cole brook in Becket with Dr McClean and George 'trouting' Good luck. Among other pleasant sounds was much pleased to hear all day long the wild and charming notes of the 'white-throated sparrow.' Also heard the peculiar notes of the olive-sided flycatcher in the secluded and wooded valley through which Cole brook runs and roars.

"August 13. At Ingersoll's dell, a quiet secluded and shaded spot about a mile from Main street and through which runs a brook, I have heard through June, July and this evening for the last time a pair of charming white-throated sparrows. Probably I have seen and heard the pair at least 40 times and always near the same spot. A few minutes before sunset I generally passed into the dell near the arbor and just opposite, mounted on a young elm I was almost always sure of finding the male bird singing his best; and although I generally took a seat on the grass within a dozen yards of him, so far from frightening him away he seemed to be rather gratified in having even one appreciative listener, for frequently I had no sooner taken my seat and commenced to imitate his peculiar wild whistle than he, as if to show me the extent of his musical powers and the folly of attempting to imitate him, would ruffle up his crown feathers and strike up two or three additional notes and trill them in a most exquisite prolonging and tremulous sound. This he would repeat for half an hour at a time, not moving from the same spot where he began. These charming interviews were kept up through June, July and August when I saw and heard him for the last time on the 13th. Although I searched diligently I could never discover the nest which was without doubt concealed at no great distance."

The white-throated sparrow, or Peabody bird, is now well known to be a common summer resident of the higher mountain towns of Western Massachusetts, at an altitude where the balsam fir becomes a common forest tree, but, besides the statement of Mr Hildreth, I know of no record of its occurrence in Springfield or any of the nearby towns during the nesting season.

The cliff swallow no longer builds its nest in the caves of any barn on Main street or elsewhere in Springfield. At the time Mr Hildreth wrote it was a comparatively new comer in New England, emerging from the then western wilderness early in the 19th century. The celebrated Lemuel Shaw, chief justice of the supreme judicial court, was one of the first to note its presence here. He stated that he found it at the White mountains in the summer of 1816.

The rose-breasted grosbeak still nests in the Peabody cemetery, although a large portion of the young are destroyed by cats. The tiny notes of the black poll warblers are not now heard among the elms of Court square at the time these migrants pass to and from their far northern summer home, but the harsh and disagreeable notes of the English sparrow will reach the ear, sounds not often heard in this vicinity when Mr Hildreth took his morning walks.

ROBERT O. MORRIS.

Springfield, March 11, 1914.

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